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AUTHOR Hayward, Abbe; Stott, Clare
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of student stress in a further education (FE) college in northwest England. In collaboration with the college, two questionnaires were developed, one for the teaching staff and the other for the students. Questionnaires were distributed to 69 staff and 1,100 students, with a response rate of 94 percent from staff and 84 percent of the students. Interviews were also conducted with a sample of staff and a cross-section of students. The study found that the majority of student respondents appeared to be content and not suffering from significant distress. Most students, however, felt that exams were very stressful. Other significant stresses included academic-related issues, family problems, and worry about the future. Staff members believed that peer pressure and social status were significant stresses for the students, along with part-time jobs. In common with the students, staff also mentioned future careers and high expectations as causes of stress. As a result of the study, the college developed strategies to remedy problems caused by stress related to academic work, personal problems, the need for social areas, college policies, and student-staff relationships. (KC)

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Student stress in an FE college: an empirical study

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Summary

The issue of stress in the further education (FE) student population is woefully under-researched, despite an urgent need to understand the pressures facing young people. Without such an understanding it is impossible to give students sensitive and appropriate help at times of crisis and assist them in attaining their academic potential.

In mid-1997 FEDA was delighted to undertake a comprehensive study of student stress on behalf of an FE college. Close co-operation with the college enabled FEDA to undertake a questionnaire survey with almost all the college's staff and students as well as face-to-face interviews with a subsample. Both qualitative and quantitative information was collected. The research explored perceptions of the college and causes of stress, and evaluated sources of college-based support.

This bulletin presents the findings of that research, highlighting the similarities and differences between the perceptions of staff and students. It then outlines the actions taken by the college as a result and finally draws out some important messages for the whole FE sector.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the students and staff of Sir John Deane's College.

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Background

Stress appears to be endemic in FE. Although it is a very individual, personal issue, as people have different tolerances to stress, it can be caused or exacerbated by institutional factors. Social tensions, problems at work, or specific traumatic events may all decrease our well-being. When we are worried, anxious, or our self-esteem is threatened, we may react both physically (e.g. higher blood pressure, dry mouth) and psychologically (e.g. panic, lack of concentration). If the cause of stress is prolonged, chronic problems can result, such as depression or an inability to cope with previously manageable pressures. Lecturers suffer the strains of inspections, job insecurity, changing assessment practices and curricula, increased emphasis on performance, contracts disputes, and increasing workloads and administration. It is hardly surprising that, according to a survey for the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), one in four has had to take time off work due to stress-related illness (Earley, 1994).

While stress among teachers, lecturers and student teachers is well reported, student stress appears to be somewhat overlooked. A search of publications and databases failed to turn up any systematic studies of student stress in the FE sector (except for a questionnaire, termed the Student Stress Inventory, which was used several years ago to examine stress experienced by sixth formers, see Dobson and Metcalfe, 1988).

The college

The research was undertaken at a sixth form college in a small manufacturing town in an affluent area of the North West of England. Its students are drawn from across the county, mainly from wealthy, professional areas, with almost no ethnic minority intake. The college caters only for students aged 16 to 19 who are taking two-year Advanced courses.

By traditional measures, the college was, and still is, performing well. It has a reputation for excellence, and a clear focus on the pursuit of academic success in order to gain knowledge, skills, competencies and qualifications. The college also has a pastoral support programme which aims to develop students as individuals, making them feel valued and increasing their self-esteem.

The college had recently obtained a Grade 1 for its Student Recruitment, Guidance and Support, and for Teaching and Learning, from FEFC inspectors. However, it felt that it might be possible to improve its already comprehensive system of student support by focusing more closely on the needs of its students. It believed that its drugs and student services policies needed refining and wanted first to investigate students' views.

Why the need for the research?

General informal contacts with students had led the college to believe that stress in the student population was increasing. In many cases, this was believed to be due to problems outside the college, such as marital breakdown or financial difficulties. Nevertheless, college staff were worried and obviously also wanted to help students achieve their academic potential.

Against this backdrop of pastoral concern, events were brought to a head when two students at the college died. The inquests recorded an open verdict in one case and suicide in the other. Tragically, suicide among young people is more common than many people realise – the second highest cause of death after road accidents (Parry, 1996). The Samaritans estimate that perhaps one in every 100 women aged 16 to 19 tries to kill herself (four times the figure for young men). The numbers of young men actually committing suicide have been on the increase, outnumbering female suicides by three to one (Swinden, 1996).

There was a suggestion of a drugs connection with both of the students who died. Both were pleasant, able young men who, the college subsequently discovered, were living in some fear due to threats they had received from drug dealers because of debt.

Although the deaths occurred out of college, the shock they generated resulted in the college taking a close look at the pressures facing its students. Why had neither the two boys nor their friends felt able to confide in someone at the college, when things were clearly reaching crisis point? From talking to students, staff felt that perhaps the students would have been too afraid of being expelled to discuss their drugs-related problems with the college. This was because the college had always responded to drugs with a zero tolerance policy: any student found taking, dealing, or in possession of drugs on campus, was expelled. However, the college also wanted to be supportive, so it had stated that if students approached a member of staff and explained that they had a drugs problem, the college would help and support them as far as they could. With the two deaths, the college was impelled to rethink its policy on drugs. It also wanted to take all possible measures to minimise stress within the student population, and felt that perhaps a review of all current student support mechanisms was required. FEDA was therefore asked to investigate the issues surrounding student stress at the college.

Methodology

In collaboration with the college, two questionnaires were developed, one for the teaching staff and the other for the students (members of the Upper and Lower Sixth).

Both the staff and the student survey instruments were piloted at a college in the South West of England. Following pilot testing, minor modifications were made to the wording of a few of the items before the questionnaires were finalised and distributed.

Sixty-nine staff questionnaires and 1,100 student questionnaires were distributed internally, in order to maximise the response rate. This had the added benefit that the college was seen to endorse the survey. All students and all members of the teaching staff were given a questionnaire during a tutorial period. They completed it there and then, and sealed it in an envelope provided to ensure confidentiality. All the sealed envelopes were then collected and returned to FEDA for analysis. At no time did college staff see the individual questionnaires.

A novel and crucial feature of this project was the incorporation of identical questions in both the student and staff questionnaires. This enabled valid comparisons to be made between student and staff perceptions, so that differences and similarities were highlighted.

In total, 65 staff questionnaires and 922 student questionnaires were completed and returned. This represented 94% of the teaching staff and 84% of the student population, which is an extremely impressive result. Postal surveys typically attain response rates of 20% – 30%. The uncommonly high response to this survey was due to the close co-operation between the college and FEDA during its administration and the commitment of staff and students to the project.

In order to explore the issues further, face-to-face interviews were also conducted with a sample of individual students and a cross-section of the college staff. One staff group comprised the senior management team, another senior tutors, and two further mixed groups of staff based on curriculum area, length of service and gender.

Students at the college were selected for interview on the basis of a brief response sheet which they had completed and returned to FEDA. Interviews were voluntary; students completed the response sheet only if they were willing to be interviewed. Ten students were chosen on the basis of their gender (a mix of males and females was required) and their year (both Upper and Lower Sixth students were interviewed).

All interviews, as with the questionnaires, were confidential and anonymous.

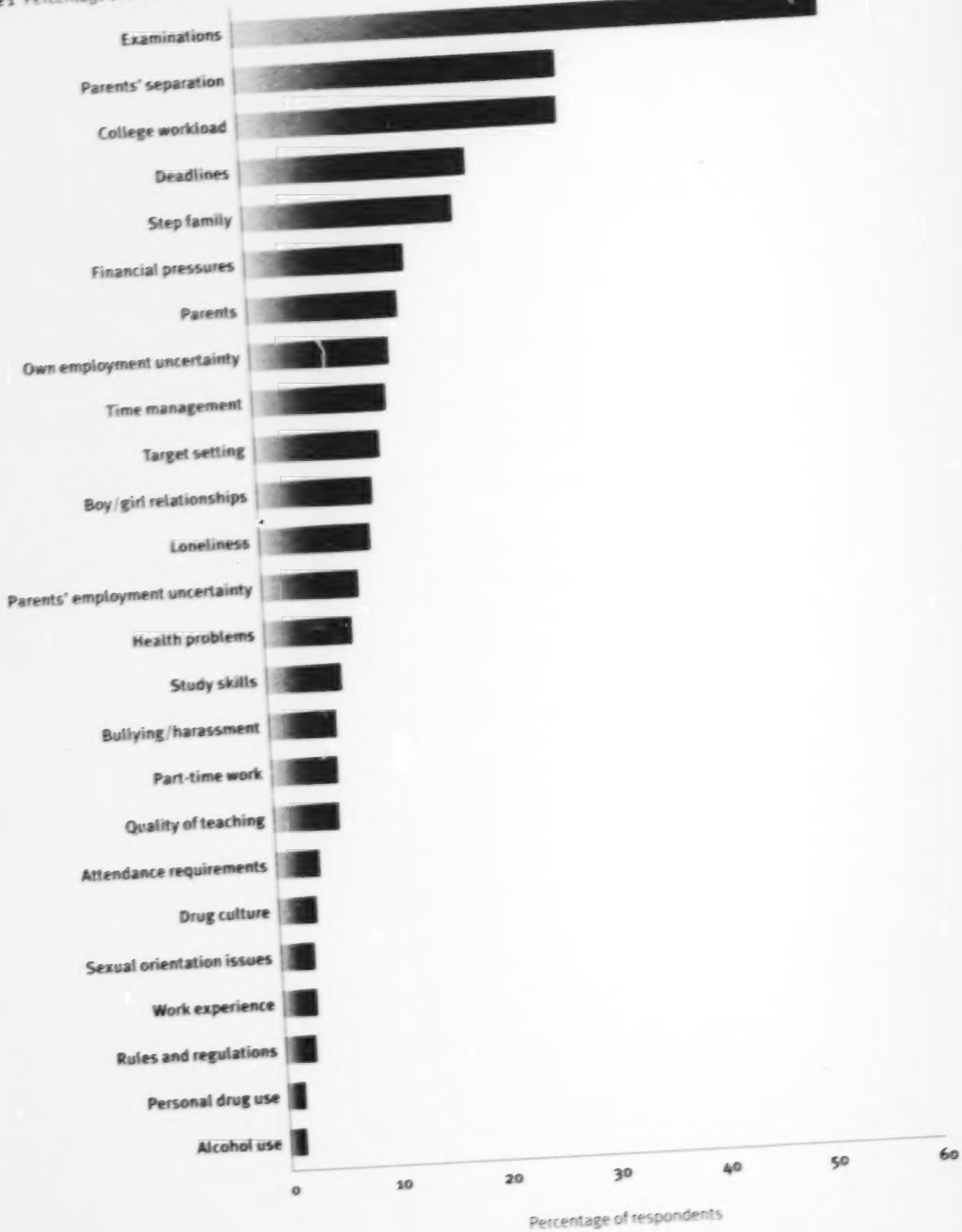
The aims of the student and staff interviews were to obtain supplementary information and to investigate some items in greater depth. To enable comparisons, the two sets of interviews explored similar issues, such as:

- the perceived main characteristics of the college
- examples of productive and negative pressures
- ways of establishing common ground between staff and students.

The student interviews also investigated students' perceptions of staff, good and bad points of the college, and student feelings of stress. Staff interviews also explored the perceived efficacy of support systems, stressful aspects of student life, and balancing disciplinary and pastoral roles.

A report of the complete project was sent to the college and a presentation of findings to the college's senior management team arranged.

Figure 1 Percentage of students who rated these items as 'very stressful'



Key findings

The majority of students in the survey appeared to be content and not suffering significant distress. Students were asked what were the most enjoyable aspects of their life at present. Predictably, most identified their social life, followed by sport, home, hobbies and college. Worryingly, 14 students felt that 'nothing' was enjoyable in their life. This small but significant minority of unhappy students was also evident from other responses to the questionnaire. For example, in response to a subsequent question, 11 students reported that they felt 'not at all happy with myself'.

The survey found that three-quarters of the students had a part-time job, and that 35% of these worked for nine hours or more per week. Most worked in food outlets or as shop assistants, although a variety of employment was mentioned including physically demanding jobs such as labouring, late night work in pubs and clubs, and potentially stressful work such as selling. Having a part-time job while at college is an issue which is purported to cause students stress and lead them to underachieve in their studies (Williams, 1995). Somewhat in contradiction to this, having a part-time job was rated as 'very stressful' by only 6% of student respondents (see Figure 1 opposite). This was reinforced during the student interviews, where one respondent reported that her work was very enjoyable and gave her a different perspective on life.

Figure 1 shows that most respondents felt that exams were very stressful. Other significant stresses included academic-related issues (college workload, deadlines) and family problems (separation, step family). Students were also asked to suggest other stress factors in their life. Many felt that looking to the future and the pressure to achieve were causes of stress. For example, one student wrote 'the fear of failing and people telling me how to run my life'. Others cited their family, other people's problems, money/debts, sport, their physical appearance, and a lack of time in which to relax or revise. In a comparable question, members of the college staff felt that peer pressure and social status were significant stresses for the students, particularly if their peers were more affluent than themselves. For example, some staff believed that students felt a need to own a car, which then caused them financial pressure, so leading to the desire for a part-time job, decreasing their overall free time, and leaving them less able to cope with academic pressures. These attitudes were not wholly substantiated by the responses of the students themselves, although financial pressure was a worry for some. However, in common with the students, staff also mentioned future career, HE and high expectations as causes of stress.

Figure 2 People to whom students would turn to discuss academic problems

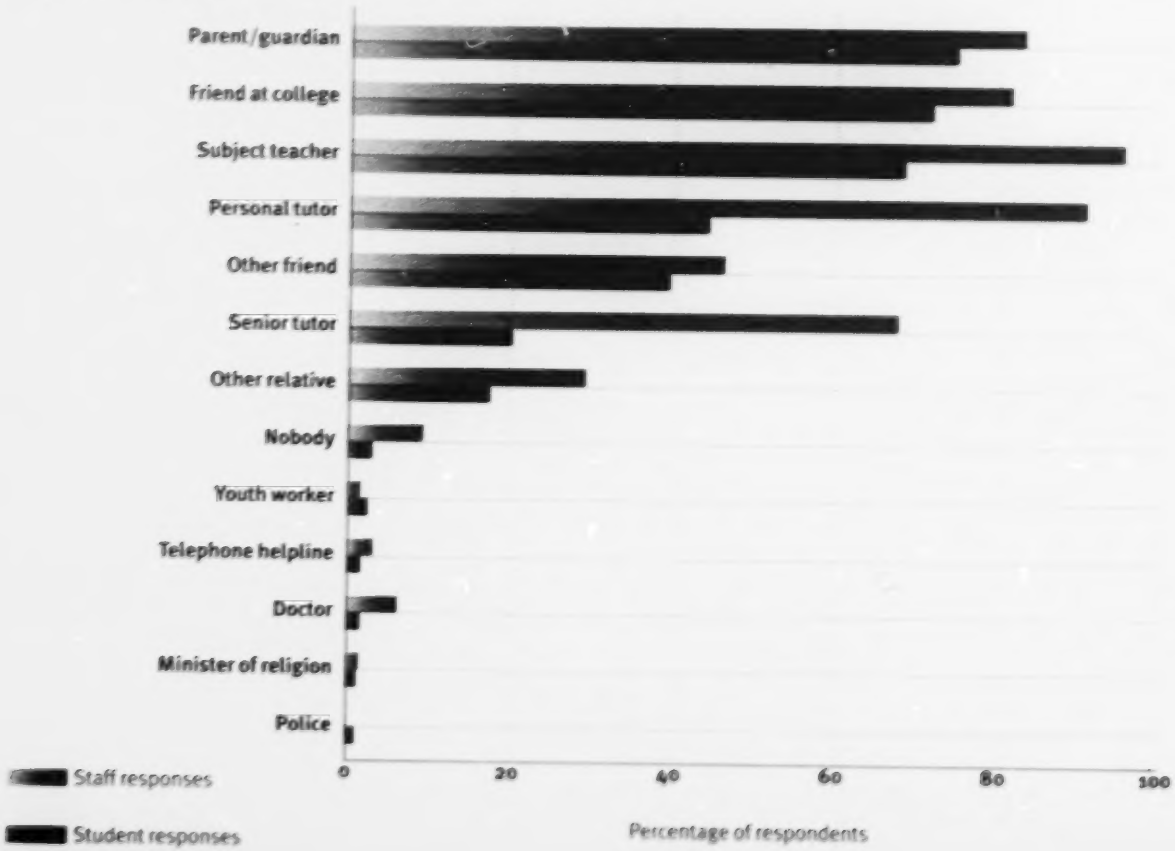
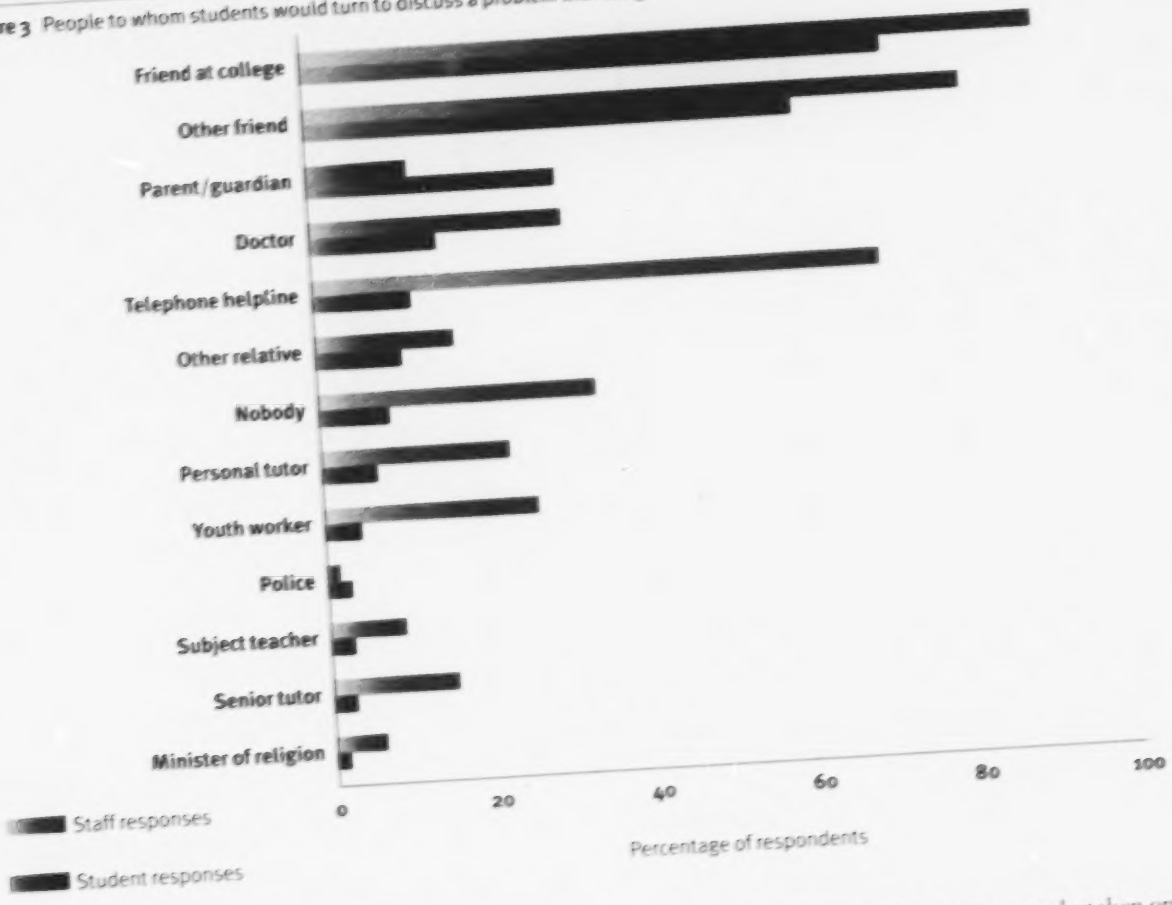


Figure 3 People to whom students would turn to discuss a problem with drugs



The questionnaire asked students whom they would turn to in order to discuss a variety of problems (academic problems, health, drugs, alcohol, relationships/sexual issues and financial worries). Staff were also asked whom they believed students would turn to. A number of interesting discrepancies were identified. For example, 66% of staff thought that students would be able to discuss health problems with their personal tutor, whereas only 6% of students said that they would do so. Other differences are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

It is noticeable from Figure 2 that most staff had a more clearly stated view on this issue than students. The figure shows that students would turn to their subject teacher, personal tutor or senior tutor, as well as parents and friends, when they had an academic problem. The students themselves placed less emphasis on college staff as a source of academic support. One possible reason for this was the dual role which many tutors have, comprising both pastoral support and discipline. As one student put it, 'people are unlikely to go to the same people who discipline them with their problems.'

In terms of drugs, many staff anticipated that students would find a telephone helpline a source of support, but this was not borne out by the students' responses. Students were more likely to turn to their friends and parents to discuss problems with drugs.

Tests of statistical significance were undertaken on a series of variables (questions within the survey) against a key question (relating to whether respondents felt happy with themselves at present). These tests revealed that, in general, those students who felt able to share their problems with others were happier than those who could not.

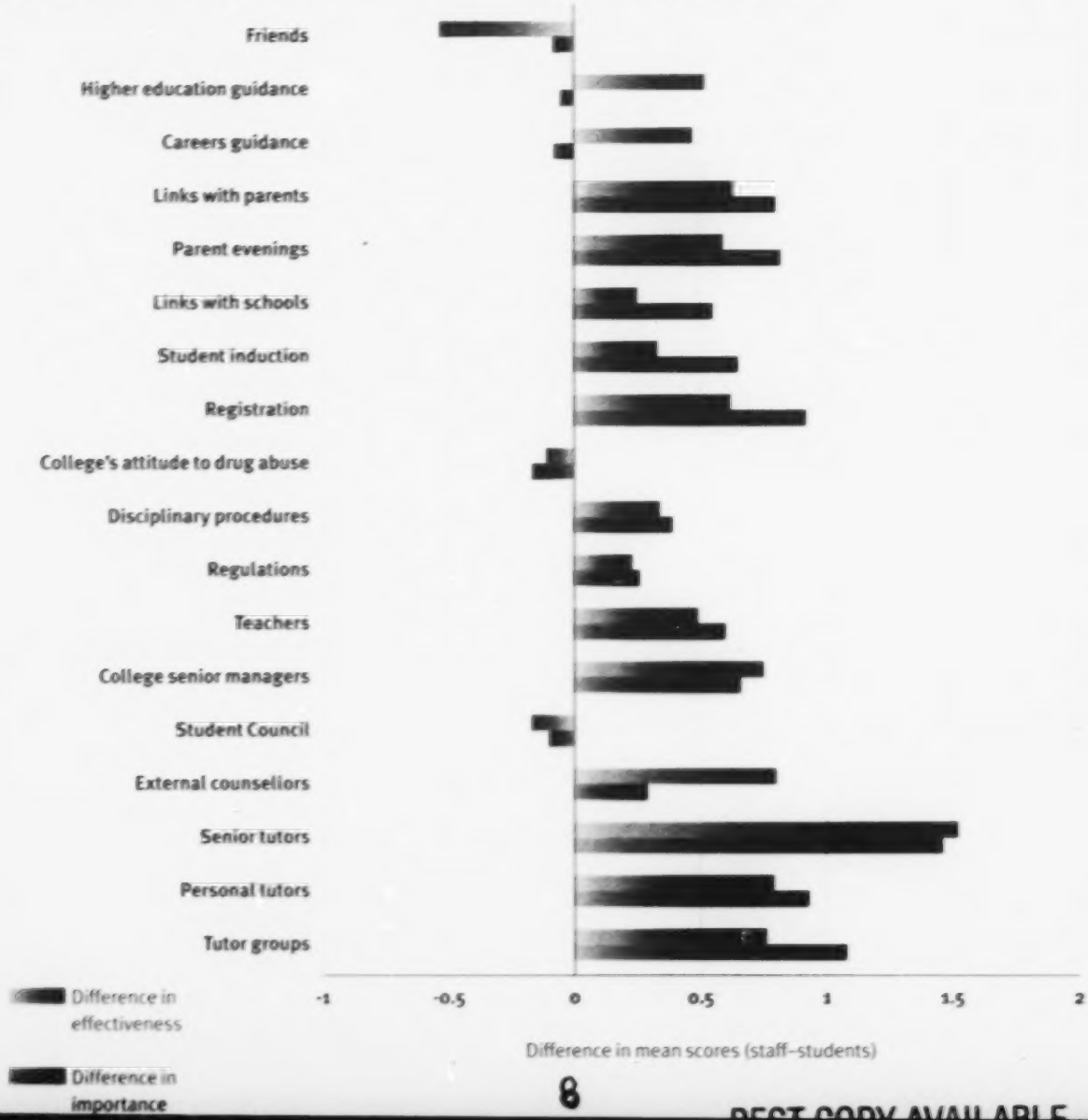
An important element of the survey was a review of the college's existing support mechanisms. Both students and staff were asked to rate the ways in which the college provided support to students, in terms of both their importance and their actual effectiveness. Average scores were calculated for both the student and the staff ratings, then subtracted in order to highlight areas of disagreement. Figure 4 on page 7 shows the result. In Figure 4 all the columns to the right of the vertical axis indicate areas in which staff gave a higher mean importance or mean effectiveness score than students. If the average student scores were higher than those of the staff, a column to the left of the vertical axis results. As the figure indicates, friends were, on average, perceived to be a more effective source of support by students than staff had anticipated. However, more striking is the greater disparity between staff and student perceptions of the importance and effectiveness of support offered by senior tutors, personal tutors and tutor groups. Clearly staff feel that these and other mechanisms (like

links with parents, registration, and senior managers) are more important than students believe them to be.

Several suggestions were made for adding to, or improving, the college's support mechanisms. Students emphasised the need for an assurance of confidentiality if problems were aired. Over a third of the student respondents, and many members of staff, suggested the appointment of an independent counsellor. Both staff and students called for improved communications: many students specified a more friendly and accessible approach and staff wanted more time to talk and listen to students. Several students suggested that the sources of college support should be explained more clearly and widely publicised. Some students wanted it noted that their lives were multidimensional: the academic part was just one among many elements – "college is not the "be all" and "end all" of our lives". One commented that the college should not treat "academic" success as a life or death situation because it is not. "You can breathe quite well without it."

Students were asked what, if anything, helped them to cope with stress. The most common solution was "going out", but a wide variety of other responses were given, ranging from social activities (sport, talking to friends, family, boy/girlfriend, drinking) to solitary activities (being alone, watching TV, listening to music, having a bath, crying) and denial (ignoring or blocking out the problem). Therapeutic methods (meditation, yoga, aromatherapy) were also mentioned. A minority replied that "nothing" helped them to cope, a few cited drugs, and some suggested self-harm, "I used to cut myself", or violence towards others, "lashing out at people, shouting, hitting".

Figure 4 Comparisons of perceived effectiveness and importance of various support mechanisms



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The students were also asked to suggest factors that made coping with stress difficult for them. A wide variety of sometimes complex issues emerged in response to this question. Over half the respondents stated college pressure or college work, and a third felt that problems related to their home life made it difficult to cope. Over 50 other issues were raised, including a lack of time to relax, an inability to open up and express problems with others, feeling run down, worry about the future, low self-confidence, a lack of privacy at home, relationship difficulties, poor health, and intolerance or a lack of understanding in others. It can be seen from this and responses to other parts of the questionnaire that an intricate web of emotion is at work. A few quotes may illustrate the interconnectedness of some issues:

> *Don't like revealing emotions so no one knows I am stressed. Don't like to trouble family with my problems as my mum is ill.*

> *I tend to react aggressively to stress which is seen by many of my friends as me just being a moron. So then I get more stressed and don't speak to anyone. I would like to talk to my friends about my stresses but they just dismiss them as trivial problems.*

> *The responsibility of bringing others down too.*

> *Trying to pretend everything's OK when it's not. Having to keep a 'happy face' because that is what is expected of you, by friends, teachers and parents.*

> *The idea that even now people have to live up to others' expectations of them.*

Students and staff were asked how they thought staff could become more in touch with the realities of student life today. Most responses agreed that the answer lay in friendly, informal communication, although staff also suggested INSET/training. Some students recommended that staff should ask them about issues beyond the college so that they could see what was happening in other areas of the students' life. As one put it, 'they need to realise that our only problem is not that of academic achievement' (sic). Students wanted staff to adopt a pragmatic approach and be less shocked when hearing about all aspects of student life. One said that staff should 'accept that people do take drugs, have sex, drink, smoke, etc, so that if people do have problems related to them they might be able to help rather than ignore the problem.'

Suggestions were sought for outside agencies with whom the college should have close links. Over three-quarters of the students felt that the college should have regular contact with the careers service and drugs agencies, and about half felt that it was important for the college to have links with health services and clinics, higher education establishments, local firms and social services. Staff responses were in agreement with this.

In order to help identify risk factors, all participants were asked how the college might develop its ability to recognise students who are at risk of significant stress. This generated several ideas from students, of which the most frequently suggested were for staff to:

- spend more time with students
- talk and listen more
- watch out for students:
  - whose marks were dropping
  - who were failing to hand in work
  - who had poor attendance
  - who were falling behind the rest of the class.

They also suggested training for staff to recognise the signs and offer counselling. This was echoed in the responses from the staff, as was the need for more time to see students individually and improve communications.

Actions taken or proposed by the college

Throughout the research it was clear that the college placed considerable emphasis on the project and took its subject matter seriously. It maintained a very co-operative attitude with the research team, committed time and resources, and gave proper consideration to any issues arising.

Following publication of the report, the college was keen to give a thorough and appropriate response to the project's findings and take positive steps to address student stress.

On receiving FEDA's report, the college's senior and personal tutors met over two evenings to discuss its implications. A day's conference was also held, attended by the senior management team and the senior tutor team, in order to forge a suitable response from the college. In many instances, the FEDA research produced hard evidence for issues which the college had anticipated might be in need of improvement. The resulting proposals for action fell into five categories:

- stress due to academic work
- stress due to personal problems
- need for social areas
- college policies
- student-staff relationships.

Stress due to academic work

The college recognised that, due to the switch to a modular exam structure, students are under sustained pressure from the Lower Sixth onwards to meet deadlines and prepare for external exams. Early diagnosis of difficulties is therefore essential. The college now gives increased support to bridging the gap between A-levels and GCSEs, with the emphasis on the students analysing for themselves their strengths and weaknesses in terms of study, and referring themselves to workshops offering extra support. Workshops on problems like time management have been set up, as well as specific skills workshops on communications and numeracy. In the classroom, teachers are becoming increasingly conscious of the need for really effective methods of checking students' understanding, including the creation of an ethos where all students feel free to share their difficulties.

For students who are falling behind with their studies, a more systematic approach involving all their subject teachers has been adopted. Teachers report back weekly to the senior tutors on students having difficulties, and the senior tutors interview the students each week, discussing their progress with them.

Greater emphasis is now placed on helping students to come to terms early with unrealistic academic expectations and career aspirations, so that they do not put themselves under undue pressure to no real purpose.

Stress due to personal problems

In order to address stress due to students' personal problems, the college decided to appoint a counsellor who could offer a free and confidential service to students. Staff training was also arranged to help staff listen and advise students, and to recognise the signs of student stress. Guidelines for personal tutors on their support function were drawn up, and more careful communication was agreed between all staff who have contact with a student experiencing personal difficulties.

Need for social areas

Another issue which the college is addressing is the lack of social areas – it has only a small canteen. The report suggested extending the refectory space into a bright, accessible, common area where students can socialise both with their peers and with members of staff on an informal basis. The need to improve the canteen is acknowledged by the college, who are examining all options within their financial limitations.

College policies

The research served to highlight the importance of two-way communication. As part of the review of certain college policies and student support mechanisms, the college therefore decided to give students greater involvement in the writing and publicising of such policies. Devising policies in a participative and responsive manner should make them more relevant and accessible to students, and hopefully more effective.

In particular, the college involved students as well as senior staff in rewriting its drugs policy. Guidelines were also drafted by staff and students on how to put the policy into practice. Compulsory sessions for students on drugs-related education were introduced and personal tutors were trained to use the new classroom material. Guidelines for staff and INSET sessions on drug awareness were also organised. The first priority remained to deter drug possession and dealing on campus but the emphasis changed from, as one of the college vice principals put it, 'thou shalt not' to 'look after yourselves; look after each other'. The aim of the new policy was to raise awareness so that individuals realise when drugs are becoming a problem for them, and to encourage them to seek help.

Student-staff relationships

Last but not least comes the issue of student–staff relationships. There is no 'quick fix'; rather it will be an on-going process on both sides in order to foster a trusting, open atmosphere within which problems can be aired and help offered and accepted. The fact that the college was concerned enough to commission this research has shown both students and staff that the issue of student stress is taken very seriously. Several student respondents said in their questionnaire that by undertaking the survey, and acting on the information received, the college has shown that it cares. The many debates and discussions that have gone on between members of staff in the wake of this work have gone a long way to raising staff awareness and have encouraged them to show students that they are approachable. The college has reported that, some six months after the report, there has been an increase in the number of students who feel able to share their problems frankly with staff.

Issues for the FE sector

Stress can be managed in various ways, for example:

- provision of information about the stressful event (to reduce uncertainty and increase control)
- encouragement of constructive thoughts (to help get things in perspective) (Gross, 1987).

In the light of these traditionally advocated techniques, the college's responses to the study seem entirely appropriate: the flow of information between students and staff has improved, and this, together with the appointment of a college counsellor and a revamp of certain policies, should serve to provide students with a positive, constructive approach to their problems. The college has clearly invested much time and consideration in both initiating and developing the research itself, and in devising suitable, comprehensive responses. The complete process could serve as a role model for other similar institutions.

Although it is tempting to believe otherwise, the experiences of this college are unlikely to be unique. As mentioned earlier, stress in FE is widespread, and there is no reason to assume that students are immune. In the wake of the publicity the college received at the time of the two deaths, members of staff received informal feedback from other college principals and vice principals recounting similar problems of drug abuse and pressures on students. Students at the college, too, say that drugs were available at their previous schools but, as one student said, 'of course they were around but my school would never have been up-front about it'. Previous FEDA research has already indicated that, in today's competitive FE climate, there are public image difficulties for colleges in acknowledging drugs-related problems (Mitchell and Bone, 1997). In the light of experience, the college is keen to stress that, in its view, the best way to combat drug abuse and other sources of student stress on campus is through a spirit of honesty and openness. The alternative is, as they put it, 'while we are protecting our reputations, we may be putting our young people at risk'.

There are some issues identified by the research that are worth reiterating for their potential applicability to other colleges and sixth forms.

Although there are many areas in which staff are highly attuned to the feelings and opinions of their students, the work has highlighted some areas of disparity. It is always worth challenging one's preconceptions about what others are thinking, in order to improve communications. For example, the questionnaire survey revealed that staff and student perceptions of the effectiveness of support services did not generally coincide. This shows that having systems in place is not enough. Their value needs to be evaluated both by those who do and those who do not use them. It is precisely this sort of information that can lead to a revamp of the services, often at low/no cost in order to make them more relevant and accessible to all.

It is clear that the college involved in this research attains considerable academic success and that most students are happy during the two years or so that they spend there. However, there is a minority of students who are clearly unhappy, and who should be recognised as experiencing complex and potentially severe stress. It is these students who are unable to cope and may require immediate support. When offering help to students it should be realised that academic failure can be an indicator of wider problems, and may not be due simply to laziness or inability. A student's falling standards may be the symptoms of a deeper problem, one which may extend beyond academic life.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the benefits to the college of having been through this research. It has been possible to contribute to making a vibrant and successful institution even better. Due to the way in which the research was conducted, involving both staff and students (and each seeing the other's involvement), a new spirit of trust and openness is being generated. Issues which are difficult for any institution to tackle are now being addressed co-operatively, to everyone's long-term benefit. All colleges need to consider these issues, in order to ensure that student welfare, as well as academic achievement, remains top of the agenda.

Further information

FEDA is taking forward this area of work in a research project on **New approaches to student counselling** which is investigating how colleges are managing the provision of personal counselling to students. This research will be completed in July 1998. Related publications, based on research recently undertaken by FEDA include *Youth work in colleges: building on partnership* and *Tackling drugs together: addressing the issues in the FE sector.*

For further information please contact Wayne Wright or Clare Stott at FEDA's Bristol office, Tel: [01761] 462 503 Fax: [01761] 463 104.

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Tel: [0171] 436 0020 Fax: [0171] 436 0349

Feedback and orders should be directed to **FEDA Publications Department**, Coombe Lodge, Blagdon, Bristol BS40 7RG

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